

Molokai beef hot issue at school board

By Kay Lynch

Advertiser Education Writer

Several school board members are uneasy about having Molokai beef in the school lunch program, despite being told repeatedly that no carcasses infected with bovine tuberculosis get past state and federal meat inspectors.

At the board's study session at Wilson Elementary School yesterday afternoon, Dr. Arthur Liang, chief of the Health Department Communicable Disease Division said, "People should be very clear that the tuberculosis we are talking about is not the same kind humans get. Essentially, it is not a human health problem."

Liang later said, "We don't know of any cases in Hawaii — and we have documentation going back 20 years — of a human contracting bovine tuberculosis. We have never treated a human case."

State Veterinarian Calvin Lum, representing the Department of Agriculture, said "There has never been a documented case of bovine tuberculosis being passed on to a human after the meat has gone through the inspection program — anywhere in the United States."

The discussion was related to state-federal plans to slaughter all 10,500 head of cattle on Molokai over the next few months, to rid the island once and for all of bovine tuberculosis, a problem since the 1930s.

Only 2 percent of the cattle are infected, say

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state officials, but the presence of the bacteria keeps all Molokai cattle under quarantine and reduces their market value.

Diseased carcasses will be buried or incinerated; those that pass strict government meat inspections will be allowed on the market. Ranchers will be reimbursed by a federal indemnity program. After a year, new cattle will be introduced on Molokai.

"As a courtesy" and "to their credit," said Superintendent of Education Francis Hatanaka, Palama Meat Co. informed the state that Molokai beef would be included in the 700,000 pounds of ground beef it will supply this school year under contract.

Hatanaka said that led to a meeting of representatives of the meat company and the state departments of agriculture, health and education.

"When we were assured there was no problem, I recommended that we accept the meat, and I relayed this to the board," Hatanaka said.

School board member John Penebacker said he has been "inundated with calls from parents" concerned about possible state purchase of tainted meat. He said if the board "can't change that impression, we shouldn't purchase the meat."

Lum said the Agriculture Department has received only "five or six" inquiries.

The beef is in storage and will not be delivered to the Department of Education for about six months, Hatanaka said, so there is time to set the record straight.

"Here we have public distrust of what government officials are saying because of heptachlor," said the Rev. Darrow Aiona, school board chairman. "We are just reaping the same kind of problem. If we are going to use this meat, we need a massive public relations effort."

(When the pesticide heptachlor was discovered in Oahu fresh milk in 1982, government officials initially insisted the contamination was not harmful. Milk recalls, multimillion-dollar suits and investigations followed.)

"The meat is not a new problem, because we've been using Molokai beef at least 10 years," said Hatanaka. "Maybe the problem was calling attention to it. An attempt on the part of government to be honest kind of backfired in this case."

Hatanaka proposed having "a special lunch" featuring Molokai beef, "with all school board members and myself partaking of the beef."

But Penebacker later said, "When you do your campaign and your special dinner to inform the public, don't invite me."

Department of Education business specialist Vernon Honda said he didn't know of another vendor who could supply 700,000 pounds of ground beef, if the contract with Palama Meat Co. were canceled.

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